

# How are students coping after 2 academic years under the pandemic?

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When students sat down to write their final exams last year, many must have hoped that they wouldn't have another year of the pandemic ahead of them. Another year of alternating in-person and online classes, of unpredictability and uncertainty, of stress and anxiety. And yet, here they are: a second year of Covid endured and another round of exams in sight. This cohort of students has certainly lived through more than their share.



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Of course, these experiences have not been consistent. Rather, they have varied depending on students' access to high-speed internet, to safe and secure accommodation, to healthcare, and to mental and emotional support structures. Ours is not a country, nor a tertiary education system, of equals.

## Burnout

With the end of the year approaching, many students are reporting experiences of burnout. Their energy and ability to focus are flagging, they're battling to manage their time effectively, and procrastination, in many instances, is on the rise. It just seems too much to sustain: the pressures of academic life and the pressures of a world in crisis, a world at odds with itself. Covid has fragmented society and relationships, and this lack of consensus and cohesion is jarring and unsettling for us all.

But the year-end exams are going to take place whether students are ready or not. For the many who are feeling confused, overwhelmed and exhausted, the prospect is terrifying.

## Bridging the gap

Over the course of the last 18 months, one of the most important resources students have had to rely on – disadvantaged

students in particular – is their tutors. Tutors are bridging the gap that Covid has created, academically especially, but also in terms of providing the consistency, reassurance and stability necessary for students to continue to study amid a pandemic.

Tuta-Me serves to connect university students with highly qualified tutors and, since Covid hit, our students have constantly emphasised the value of their tutors in helping them pull through. As harsher lockdowns were imposed and in-person lessons abandoned, it was their tutors, these students say, who were the only constant in their lives, providing an anchor and enabling them to pass.

Of course, the tutoring process has had to adapt to Covid too, and systems and processes have had to change in order to make the most out of a very complex and unstable situation. The scheduling of lessons has become critically important and lines of communication have had to be reinforced.

Where once learners could bank their tutoring sessions until the end of the year, many of our clients have started requiring students to speak to their tutors every month. This, we have found, helps to keep students accountable and on top of their work, and helps tutors to identify and address problems well ahead of exam season.

Open and regular communication on a variety of platforms has also been invaluable. Tutors have learnt to engage with their students constantly, reminding them that help is on hand. And different communications platforms, including ones not used prior to Covid, such as WhatsApp, have helped to ensure that interaction between students and tutors is easy, convenient and frequent.

## **Educating corporates**

The corporates that sponsor bursaries and expect students to succeed – especially now, during Covid – need to be sensitive to the challenges these students are facing. In many instances, corporates aren't aware just how much support students need. The demand for personalised attention that improves students' academic knowledge, confidence, and soft skills is immense.

You can't give someone a car without teaching them how to drive first. The same goes for education: having a bursary doesn't mean that a student will automatically thrive. This investment has to go beyond the purely financial if students are to have a fighting chance.

As the end of the year approaches, and burnt-out, exhausted students face another round of exams, it is those who have had the support of caring and attentive tutors who are most likely to succeed.

## **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

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